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Capturing the ‘authentic voice’: challenges and opportunities for voice and self-representation in two ABC storytelling projects

Sasha Mackay and Elizabeth Heck

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In recent years there has been a noticeable move by various public institutions, such as public service broadcasters, cultural institutions, including museums, art galleries and libraries, and community media and arts organisations to capture and disseminate the voices and viewpoints of ‘ordinary people’ by inviting them to share stories about their lives. One of the foremost objectives of many such projects is to provide under-represented individuals and groups with an opportunity to express and represent themselves; as such, the capture and broadcast of ‘authentic voices’ is a central value. This paper begins by discussing the challenges and opportunities that arise within storytelling projects that are facilitated by public service broadcasting institutions and that aim to amplify the voices of “ordinary people” (Thumim 2009). It discusses how ‘voice’ and ‘authenticity’ are defined and examines ways self-representations are facilitated, curated, and broadcast within such projects. We particularly question the ways in which project facilitation and the curation of stories for public broadcast can both help and hinder the amplification of ‘authentic voice’.

Broadcasting and distributing personal stories from public service media institutions suggests some interesting challenges and opportunities with this “top down” approach to what is typically regarded as “bottom up” community based participatory storytelling practice, that has its roots in community media (Hartley 2009).

Community Media is generally defined “as media that allows for access and

participation” (Rennie 2006, 22) and is a non-profit sector that largely aims to represent marginalised voices and communities, and to contribute to a diverse media landscape. Aspects that make community media distinct, according to Howley (2009) is that it offers opportunities for civil society to “talk back” to the larger institutions of public life. Now, though, Public Service broadcasters, such as the BBC and now the ABC, are using community media practices, such as grass roots collaborative storytelling as part of their programming to also amplify voices from under represented communities.

The BBC’s project *Capture Wales* was the first broadcast of personal digital stories in the early 2000s (Meadows and Kidd 2009; Thumim 2009, 2010). More recently, the ABC in Australia has initiated the *Open* project in 2010 and have invited participants in regional parts of Australia to share stories. This is in addition to earlier participatory storytelling projects such as *Heywire*, now in its 15th year, which invites true, life stories from regional youth. Both initiatives have particular relevance to the ABC’s Charter and role as a national public broadcaster, and to contribute to national identity, reflect cultural diversity, and broadcast programs of an educational nature (<http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/ABCcharter.htm>). Particular challenges for Public Service Broadcasters include editorial policies, audience expectations, production and broadcast quality value, and the chance of possibly larger institutional expectations or constraints. This will be discussed further in this paper.

The nature of curating personal digital stories for broadcast television, or indeed even new media platforms, provides the opportunity to resurrect a popular genre from the 1950s and 1960s; that of Anthology Television, which has a long history of inviting

amateurs (Kraszewski 2011, 38). Digital stories can be curated from workshops into such a program format, and curation of stories for broadcast platforms invites questions as to the authenticity and authorship of the storyteller's voice. Hartley does suggest that when such expertise is used with projects like these, the results are excellent, particularly in regard to production quality. But there is the concern as to whether the facilitation of these workshops is a "bully or a pulley" (Hartley 2009, 131). What is suggested here, is how much is the digital story personal and autobiographical, and how much has been shaped with achieving broadcast production values and themes in order to appeal to a wider audience. How much does the institution shape the stories produced?

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for both the storytellers and the broadcasters by way of a co-creative knowledge exchange and a dialogical approach to learning, where participants gain various media production and literacy skills to continue storytelling in their local communities, and PSBs gain local content and voices, as well as newly skilled citizen journalists and storytellers at the coalface of communities. The importance of giving the audience a voice is also of interest, and the motivations for such grass roots storytelling are commonly in relation to providing local content. Furthermore, storytelling projects provide an amalgamation between community media practices and public broadcasting platforms for the benefit of the public interest. On the ABC Open website, the ABC describes the aims of the project are to assist the public in acquiring various digital literacy skills, as well as an audience for their work (<https://open.abc.net.au/faq>). Thus the broadcasting institution has become an educational institution, by providing opportunities for skills development, and importantly, giving voice to under-represented communities.

The idea of ‘giving voice’ is central to many life-stories and digital-storytelling projects; furthermore, that such projects capture ‘authenticity’, ‘genuinity’, and deliver ‘real’ accounts of individual’s lives are central to their rationale, and important to project facilitators as well as participants. In this paper the term ‘voice’ refers to self-expressions and self-representations by ‘ordinary people’, captured and disseminated through personal narrative, and using digital tools. The idea of authenticity has to do with ‘realness’ and truth; when considered alongside personal narratives and voice, it is inherently linked to lived experience. Discussing the idea of voice applied to the internet, Mitra and Watts (2002) argue that the idea of authenticity is crucial to legitimising a voice in cyberspace. They write:

We offer authenticity as a multi-dimensional construct that includes notions of truth, accuracy, eloquence and an ontic connection with lived experience. An authentic voice speaks of a lived experience in an ethical and accurate genuine way (Mitra and Watts, 2002, 490).

Mitra and Watt’s discussion points to a couple of other elements embedded in the notion of authenticity which are particularly relevant to storytelling projects – that of eloquence and authority. The personal stories that are produced within life-stories and digital-storytelling projects – whether they are a community media based practice or facilitated by public institutions – are generally a polished, coherent and articulate account of lived experience. An authentic voice is therefore also naturally authoritative – it commands attention and authority precisely because it articulates ‘real life’ experiences coherently, and quite often poetically.

In storytelling projects that are managed by public service broadcasters and have sought to facilitate ‘voice’, understandings of ‘voice’ and ‘authenticity’ often appear intertwined. In seeking to amplify the voices of ‘ordinary people’, broadcasters also

perpetuate the idea that they provide opportunity for people to exercise control over their expressions and representations of self, and that the projects produce ‘real’, ‘authentic’ voices to the listening public. Our research has focused on how broadcasters can both help and hinder the amplification of ‘authentic voice’. Our two case studies are current storytelling projects within the ABC: ABC Open, and Heywire. We also refer to research that has been done on two of the BBC’s well-known digital-storytelling projects – London’s Voices and Capture Wales, both of which ended several years ago. These projects differ in significant ways and have different techniques for working with people to record and produce personal narratives.

For instance, the BBC’s projects were both workshop-based and, as Thumim suggests, followed “the tradition of digital storytelling as set out by the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California” (Thumim 2012, 75). ABC Open, on the other hand, is both a mixture of workshop based storytelling, and acquired contribution. The other thing that differentiates Open, is that it is about teaching digital literacy skills to its regional participants using available consumer based technology, thus allowing these participants to acquire the skills as citizen journalists to continue to share stories from their communities.

Heywire is an ABC Radio project and a nation-wide storytelling competition for 16-22 year olds who live in rural and regional parts of Australia. The ABC provides a website (<http://abc.net.au/heywire>) and invites youth to contribute short, personal narratives about their lives, in which they describe what life in rural, regional or remote Australia is like for them, and express their views on subjects that are

important to them. Importantly for this research is that Capture Wales and London's Voices provided workshops during which stories were curated and produced. Heywire is not a workshop-based project; it simply provides a website and invites youth to populate it with their own, individually-crafted content.

ABC Open's emphasis is about providing participants, not only with a voice to share stories on the ABC broadcasting and distribution platforms, but long term digital literacy and production skills. Although BBC Wales was similar in some regard, by way of facilitating storytelling workshops for broadcast platforms, the contemporary media landscape has allowed more accessible technology to be available to Open participants, and to learn the skills to maintain production once they have completed workshops to produce their own content in the user-generated "participatory media" culture (Jenkins 2008). The commonality between the BBC's and ABC's projects lies in two central elements: that they produce 'ordinary people's personal narratives; and subsequently broadcast authentic voices.

In a 2009 paper, Nancy Thumim noted that both London's Voices and Capture Wales worked on the premise that self-representation delivered 'authentic, real voices' to the BBC audience (Thumim 2009, 622). She states: "The implication is that CW and LV each provide the audience with access to the real, and that this is a more authentic reality than that delivered by professionals, precisely because people represent themselves" (Thumim 2009, 623). In these storytelling projects people produce self-representations through creating short, personal stories – often comprised of anecdotes or memories – spoken in the storyteller's own voice, and using photographs

and short video. Therefore, for an audience, the idea of authenticity is transmitted through the fact these are accounts of real experiences.

The idea of authenticity is equally important to the storytellers themselves. The projects are touted as providing people with an opportunity to ‘tell it like it is’ (Heywire) and ‘be heard’. Jean Burgess described that “for the storyteller the digital story is a means of becoming real to the audience” (2006, 206) and in the projects we have examined, the desire to represent the self, and make one’s own stories and ideas heard appears to be of central value to participants. My interviews with a number of young people who participated in the Heywire competition this year suggest that young people have numerous reasons for sharing stories about their lives on the Heywire website. These included wanting to release pent-up emotions; draw attention to an issue they felt was important; and sometimes to challenge the negative stereotypes of life on the land or in small communities by representing the highlights of rural and regional Australia. As winning Heywire stories are broadcast by ABC Local Radio throughout non-metropolitan Australia, most young storytellers understood Heywire as an opportunity for ‘having a voice’ and getting their own stories, ideas and opinions ‘heard’ (personal interview, February 2013).

However, the notion that storytelling projects provide opportunity for capturing and broadcasting an authentic voice largely undermines the fact the narratives produced within them are considered, deliberate representations and expressions of self.

Thumim argues that processes of mediation necessarily position people in a certain way and the self-representations are therefore both shaped and limited by the parameters of the project (Thumim 2012, 78). For instance, the intentions and

expectations that participants bring to projects and the institution's objectives and resources impact at all stages of the storytelling process – from the facilitation of storytelling workshops, to the production and broadcast of the participants' personal narratives. As such, to what extent do storytelling projects managed by institutions support people to represent themselves in the way they choose? What is authentic for the storyteller?

ABC producers and editors involved in ABC Open and Heywire have specific rationales for each project, as well as a particular editorial policy that they must fulfil. Heywire also has a strong political agenda, is partially federally-funded, and is run as a storytelling competition; thus, while its central aims are to “give rural and regional youth a voice” and, through the website, provide them with a ‘place’ and ‘platform’ for representing their own lives and identities, Heywire – by its very nature – effectively amplifies a distinct kind of self-representation. The competition requires particular criteria to be fulfilled, and some voices and viewpoints to be privileged over others. As stated on the website, “Each year, the best stories that have been uploaded to the Heywire website are chosen to be broadcast across the ABC on Triple J, Radio National and Local Radio”. Through selecting some young people's personal narratives as winners, and a select few for broadcast, the Heywire project is best supporting the amplification of voice for the storytellers whose narratives best fit their framework for voice. As such, the Heywire project is not effectively creating a space for authentic voices to be articulated and heard; there is a competition brief to fill, and personal stories amplified through radio broadcast are those which the ABC deems as an engaging, coherent depiction of lived experience. The institution's understanding and judgement of ‘authentic voice’ is privileged over the storyteller's.

ABC Open is a public participation project which provides facilitation and support for people to share their stories nationally on the ABC website and through broadcast on ABC 24. The mission statement for ABC Open suggests that the ABC is aware of the influence of informally or un-facilitated user-generated content, but sees its role as assisting the learning of its audience in digital literacy skills to sharing their personal stories as a way that they themselves can still remain relevant in the changing media landscape.

Supporting the authentic voice is of great relevance to further investigating the ABC Open Initiative, particularly as the broadcaster is empowering people with the skills to continue to tell stories from their communities. One can hypothesise that the authentic voice would be supported in this context, and an important part of the core values of the projects. In projects initiated as part of the larger Open initiative – such as the Aftermath Flood Recovery project – authenticity would be important in inviting further contributors. Participants would like to know that their voice is respected, that their stories and voices are valued by the broadcaster, and that the learning experiences they gain for their story contributions counts long after the workshop has finished. Yet – again – it is necessary to question the extent to which the organisation's intentions for the Open project and their processes of facilitation and curation impact upon and shape the narratives that are produced.

Through ABC Open and Heywire, the ABC has created spaces for a particular kind of self-representation and personal story, which is in keeping with their Charter and the perceived needs of the ABC audience. Therefore, it doesn't seem reasonable to

assume that the stories produced and broadcast through such projects are the 'authentic', or 'unmediated' voice of the public; rather, stories are tailored for and specific to the requirements and structures of the project in which they are produced. This is not to undermine the fact that projects such as Open and Heywire provide valuable opportunities for the people who participate in terms of learning digital media and narrative skills, and experimenting with modes of self-expression and self-representation. The projects can also empower people to feel their voices matter. Thus, while the idea that these projects amplify an 'authentic voice' is perhaps questionable, they still provide some kind of opportunity for people to 'speak back' to the public institutions that have, in the past, represented them.

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